

**Laughing Through the Crisis: Consumer Perceptions of Humor in Social Media Crisis
Communication**

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ABSTRACT

This thesis delves into the field of crisis management with a particular emphasis on the use of humor to conduct crisis communication. The primary goal of this research is to understand consumer perceptions regarding the use of humor in crisis communication. To achieve this, the study examines two notable cases. KFC's chicken supply shortage and Aldi's #FreeCuthbert campaign, both of which employed humor in their crisis responses.

Using qualitative content analysis, this research analyzes consumer reactions on social media platforms, particularly X (Twitter). The study systematically reviews and interprets user reaction tweets to uncover how humor impacts public perception and engagement during a crisis. The analysis provides a comprehensive understanding of the consumer sentiment surrounding these crises.

The findings indicate that, in these cases, humor was generally positively perceived by consumers, enhancing brand relatability and diffusing tension. Humor helped to humanize the brands, making their responses more engaging and less formal, which resonated well with the audience. The results showed that the effectiveness of humor in crisis communication is influenced by factors such as cultural context, the nature of the crisis, and the platform used. Therefore, while the use of humor in the two analyzed cases had a positive impact, it does not mean this will be similar in different crisis scenarios. While humor can help humanize a brand and foster goodwill, it also carries the risk of offending audiences or undermining brand credibility if not carefully executed. Organizations, therefore, need to carefully deliberate and conduct thorough research to determine whether the use of humor is an appropriate approach for their specific crisis.

This research contributes to the academic discourse on crisis communication by providing empirical evidence on the nuanced role of humor. It highlights the double-edged nature of humor, showing that while it can be highly effective, it also requires careful consideration and strategic implementation. The study offers practical insights for public relations professionals, emphasizing the need for thorough audience analysis and strategic planning to balance the benefits and risks associated with using humor in crisis situations. Understanding these dynamics is crucial in the digital age, where consumer perceptions can shift rapidly, and brand reputations are constantly under scrutiny.

KEYWORDS: *Crisis Communication, Humor, Culture, Social Media, Consumer Reactions.*

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1. Introduction

A shortage of chicken in a chicken restaurant, or a competitor starting a lawsuit because of the similarity in products. These are instances of crises organizations can face and need to be able to react to. A corporate ‘crisis’ in business refers to any major challenge that threatens the reputation or operations of an organization (Bundy et al., 2016, p. 2). It demands immediate attention and a strategic response, often testing a brand’s ability to maintain consumer trust (Bundy et al., 2016, p. 19). It is, therefore, important for organizations to have a good crisis communication strategy. There are a lot of different ways to conduct crisis communication, some are, however, more common than others. The more traditional approaches often include formal apologies, detailed explanations, and promises to rectify the situation (Coombs, 2007, p. 170). However, the evolving landscape of digital media and changing consumer expectations have led to the exploration of more innovative methods. One of these methods is the use of humor in crisis communication (Yu et al., 2022, p. 1). This approach, while unconventional, offers a unique way to communicate with audiences, potentially diffusing tension and fostering goodwill (Yu et al., 2022, p. 3). Humor in crisis communication can, for example, humanize a brand, making its response more relatable and less corporate (Meyer, 2000, p. 317; Berger et al., 2004, p. 827). However, while the results can be very positive, it does not come without risks. Its success relies on multiple factors including careful execution and a deep understanding of the perceptions of the audience (Shonk, 2024). The balance is delicate. When done right, it can be incredibly effective, however, when misjudged, it risks complicating the situation or offending the audience (Meyer, 2000, p. 329; Shonk, 2024).

Understanding how consumers react to humor in crisis situations is important for brands, especially in today’s digital world where messages spread rapidly (Lee, 2020, p. 2). The rise of social media has transformed how crises are managed and perceived (Lee, 2020, p. 2). Platforms such as X, Facebook, and Instagram allow information to spread quicker than ever before. Because of this the crisis communication by brands have more reach and visibility, brands are expected to react quicker than ever while remaining thoughtful and careful in order to not aggravate the situation (Ly-Le, 2014, p. 5). Social media also increases the role of the audience, providing a platform for them to express their opinions and reactions instantaneously (Ly-Le, 2014, p. 4). This dynamic environment makes understanding consumer perceptions of crisis communication strategies, particularly humor, even more critical.

In order to further research this the following research question has been created:

RQ: “How do consumers perceive humor as a form of social media crisis communication in the United Kingdom?”

Researching this will be done by analyzing the responses of consumers on social media of two cases where brands made use of humor as a way of crisis communication. Fast food chain KFC, faced with a chicken supply shortage, opted for a humorous apology in its advertisements, cleverly rearranging its initials “KFC” to “FCK” (Kelsall, n.d.). This created a lot of traction on social media and will be the first case used for this research. The second case will be the one of supermarket chain Aldi receiving a lawsuit from their competitors Mark & Spencer about the similarity of a cake named Cuthbert (Rodsevich, 2022). Aldi quickly responded on social media with humorous posts containing the hashtag #FreeCuthbert which went viral (Rodsevich, 2022). The reactions of the audience will be collected from the social media platform X (formerly known as Twitter). Both these cases have been chosen because they happened in the UK and are both food-related. They also take place predominantly on social media where both crisis communication strategies went viral. These similarities allow for more representative results, between both cases, that are specifically related to the United Kingdom.

As a lot of different factors can influence how a particular crisis communication is perceived by audiences, it is crucial to understand the impact humor has had on the two cases used in this study (Coombs, 2007, p. 171). In order to research this, the main characteristics of humor will be analyzed to identify them in the collected data from the KFC and Aldi crises.

Additionally, considering that the scope of this study also revolves around social media and how crisis communication is conducted there, it is important to examine the impact of social media on the collected and analyzed reactions. The study will, therefore, take a closer look on how conducting crisis communication on platforms like X influences consumer reactions to the KFC and Aldi crises. This analysis will involve using existing knowledge about the influence of social media on audience reactions and linking this to the patterns observed during the analysis of the collected data.

Analyzing these cases and conducting this research holds significant societal and academic value. On a societal level, understanding how humor in crisis communication is received by consumers can help gain insights in the broader social and cultural dynamics among them. Examples of this can be a better understanding of the collective attitude towards humor and differences in cultural sensitivity. Using these findings can ultimately result in more inclusive and effective communication by organizations, thereby benefiting society as a

whole. In practice, this understanding is crucial for brands aiming to maintain consumer trust and loyalty in the midst of a crisis. By leveraging humor appropriately, brands can potentially turn harmful situations into opportunities for positive engagement, thereby strengthening their relationship with consumers. When humor is used in communication it has the ability to humanize brands (Meyer, 2000, p. 317; Berger et al., 2004, p. 827). This can help them become more relatable and approachable, which is increasingly important in an era where consumers expect transparency and authenticity from the companies they support. Answering the research question will provide insights that may help design more effective crisis communication strategies. Potentially making them more personalized in order to have a better fit with their target audience. This can be particularly relevant in the context of social media, where consumer reactions can be instantaneous and can quickly reach a lot of other users. Understanding the nuances of consumer perceptions can enable brands to, not only, craft messages that not only address the crisis but also manage to engage and entertain their audience. This can help mitigate potential damages and even create new opportunities by building the brand identity even further.

Academically, this research contributes to the broader discourse in communication studies, particularly in area of crisis communication. Crisis communication and crisis management are topics that have been thoroughly discussed by respected scholars such as Timothy Coombs, Matthew Seeger and Robert Heath. Many theories and frameworks have been introduced regarding the topic to help individuals and organizations handle crisis situations. Two examples of these frameworks, that will be further explained in this paper, are the Situational Crisis Communication Theory by Coombs (2007, p. 173) and the Image Repair Theory by Benoit (1997, p. 178). These scholars and examples showcase that the topic of crisis communication has been vastly explored in academic literature. However, when it comes to the way humor can be used in crisis communication this is not the case. Some scholars briefly mention it, but most of them do not talk about it at all. This highlights a recurring theme of underrepresentation of this topic in academic literature. By focusing on humor in crisis communication new insights can be found on the potential benefits and drawbacks it can have. Additionally, this study adds to the understanding of how digital media and cultural contexts can influence crisis communication outcomes. By examining real-world cases, the research, therefore, offers practical implications that can add to both academic theories and professional practices.

This paper will be divided in five main chapters, the first chapter being the introduction will be followed by chapter two, the theoretical framework, which consists of

existing literature, research and frameworks on crisis communication. The impact of social media on crisis communication, consumer responses on crisis communication, and humor in crisis communication will also be discussed in the theoretical framework. Chapter three will consist of the methodology, where the research design, data collection, and data analysis will be presented. Chapter four will be divided into two main sub-chapters presenting the results of the data analysis and the discussion of these results. Lastly, chapter five will be the conclusion, which summarizes the main insights of the study, discusses its limitations, suggests directions for future research, and reflects on the achieved theoretical and societal implications.

2. Theoretical framework

In this section, the main concepts of the research question will be explained, and important frameworks regarding the topic will be introduced to provide a better understanding of the scope of the study. First the concepts crisis and crisis management will be further explained. Then the topics touched upon will be crisis communication, social media crisis communication, consumer responses on different types of crisis communication, and the use of humor in crisis communication.

2.1. Crisis and Crisis Management

First it is important to get a better understanding of the term crisis and the concept of crisis management. The term crisis is used to describe a sudden event or situation that poses a threat to a certain entity. Coombs (2007, p. 164) defines crisis as a perception of an unpredictable event that threatens important expectancies of stakeholders and can seriously impact an organization's performance and generate negative outcomes. The term is used across various sectors and can take different forms (Bundy et al., 2016, p. 4; Nteka, 2021, p. 65). For example, a crisis can relate to technological failures, economic instability, political unrest, or natural disasters (Nteka, 2021, p. 65). The cause of a crisis can also vary. Some examples of this are internal factors which involve problems in the structure of an organization or external factors when the cause comes from outside an organization (Kovoor-Misra et al., 2001, p. 81; Lin et al., 2006, p. 599). Similarly, a crisis may also be triggered due to a human or non-human factor. These examples showcase how much crises can vary between each other which leads to organizations needing to adapt to different, often unpredictable, scenarios (Chaawa et al., 2016, p. 2). They can emerge suddenly, without warning, and escalate rapidly, catching organizations off guard and leaving little time for deliberation or preparation (Chaawa et al., 2016, p. 3). The involvement of multiple stakeholders that all have their own interests also does not help as an organization needs to try and keep all of them happy at the same time (Pajunen, 2006, p. 1281).

The article by Coombs and Laufer (2018, p. 1) further builds on this topic by introducing three different stages of a crisis come forward. These stages are: the pre-crisis phase, the crisis phase, and the post-crisis phase (Coombs & Laufer, 2018, p. 1). The pre-crisis phase focuses on the prevention and preparation of an eventual crisis. It often involves the identification of potential threats and dealing with them before they become a major crisis (Coombs & Laufer, 2018, p. 2). The term used to describe the practice of anticipating possible emergency situations and developing detailed, actionable plans to manage and mitigate the

effects of these situations should they occur is called scenario planning (Schoemaker, 1995, p. 117). The pre-crisis stage, therefore, involves the training of crisis management teams and creating communication strategies/contingency plans in order to be as prepared as possible for all potential scenarios (Coombs & Laufer, 2018, p. 2). The crisis phase, which takes place during the crisis, focusses on reacting and responding accordingly to the crisis that is unfolding. This stage is critical as the actions taken here can significantly impact the repercussions the crisis can have on the organization (Coombs & Laufer, 2018, p. 3). Lastly, the post-crisis phase, this phase involves learning from the events that happened (Coombs & Laufer, 2018, p. 4). This can be, for example, looking at how the crisis unfolded, how the response to the crisis was, and what damages were caused by the crisis (Coombs & Laufer, 2018, p. 4).

The consequences of a crisis can have a great impact on a company, ranging from reputational damage to financial losses or even legal liabilities (Coombs, 2007, p. 164). Organizations that fail to effectively address crises risk worsening the situation and suffering hard to repair harm to their brand and credibility (James, 2008, p. 1). Therefore, understanding the nature of a crisis and developing proactive strategies for managing them is essential for the organization as a whole.

In order to react in the best possible way effective crisis management needs to take place. The concept of crisis management can be defined as a critical function within organizations that involves the strategic planning, coordination, and execution of activities aimed at effectively addressing and mitigating the impact of crises (Bundy et al., 2016, p. 2; Pearson & Clair, 1998, p. 60). The practice of actively planning for and managing a potential crisis is not new, it has been a common activity of organizations since the beginning of the 20th century. It can however be argued that the importance of it has increased with the years. Today's world is more interconnected than ever, news can travel at unprecedented pace and reach large audiences from all over the globe (Cheng, 2018, p. 1-2). This has led to an increase in the number of crises paired with a much greater visibility on these crises from the public (Cheng, 2018, p. 1-2). These developments have further underlined the importance of learning and understanding crisis management principles that have become imperative for organizations to enhance their chances of successfully handling a crisis (Cheng, 2018, p. 8). Because a crisis can have a multitude of causes and forms, crisis management draws upon insights from various fields, including organizational behavior, strategic management, communication studies, and risk analysis, to develop comprehensive frameworks and strategies for navigating crises effectively (Bundy et al., 2016, p. 4). Therefore, there are

various important components that make out crisis management (Seeger et al., 1998, p. 243). Three of these key aspects are crisis communication, risk assessment/contingency planning and leadership/decision making (Seeger et al., 1998, p. 243). Crisis communication involves strategically releasing information to stakeholders during a crisis (Coombs, 2010, p. 29; Diers-Lawson, 2017, p. 6; Seeger et al., 1998, p. 237). Risk assessment/contingency planning helps to identify potential threats which allows organizations to develop proactive strategies and protocols to mitigate risks and enhance preparedness for crises (Powell et al., 2016, p. 3; Seeger et al., 1998, p. 243). Leadership and decision making is essential for guiding organizations through a crisis (Kim, 2021, p. 1; Seeger et al., 1998, p. 243).

It is also crucial to make sure that crisis management is conducted in an ethical way in order to maintain trust and credibility during and after the crisis (Ulmer et al., 2019, p. 70). Ethically navigating a crisis can be achieved by being transparent towards all involved stakeholders (Ulmer et al., 2019, p. 70). Ulmer et al. (2019, p. 82) also stress the fact that it is crucial to provide information to all stakeholders in an equitable way. If one stakeholder group gets less information in comparison with other stakeholder groups, they might feel under privileged which can lead to distrust among the stakeholders (Ulmer et al., 2019, p. 82). To ensure that all involved parties are accurately informed, van der Meer and Jin (2019, p. 1) lay emphasis on the fact that organizations also need to actively manage misinformation and ensure the dissemination of accurate, reliable information during crises. The importance of fighting misinformation has become increasingly important in recent years due to the alarming rates at which it can spread on digital platforms (Ciampaglia, 2017, p. 2).

If used correctly, crisis management, therefore, a pivotal role in safeguarding organizational continuation, reputation, and stakeholder value. Embracing proactive risk management practices, fostering transparent communication, upholding ethical principles, and cultivating a culture of resilience, organizations can help organizations navigate crises and emerge stronger in their aftermath. It is also important not to forget that one of the most important aspects of crisis management is adequately communicating to all the stakeholders.

2.2. Crisis Communication

As mentioned earlier crisis communication is one of the most important aspects of crisis management, therefore the practice needs a more in-depth explanation. Crisis communication is a specialized area of public relations or corporate communication that deals with protecting and defending an individual, company, or organization facing a public challenge to its reputation (Coombs, 2010, p. 20; Diers-Lawson, 2017, p. 6). Examples of

these challenges can be natural disasters, product recalls, personal relations mistakes, etc. (Diers-Lawson, 2017, p. 2). The importance of crisis communication lies in the fact that it can shape public perceptions during these critical times (Coombs, 2010, p. 20; Diers-Lawson, 2017, p. 11; Frandsen & Johansen, 2020, p. 3). It can either worsen or better the situation of the crisis, depending on the strategy and execution (Frandsen & Johansen, 2020, p. 3).

Crisis communication is a well-researched subject in academia and many theories and frameworks have been introduced and put forward. While the strategies for crisis communication vary widely, they generally include the following three characteristics: immediate response, transparency, and a focus on key stakeholders (Cheung & Leung, 2016, p. 56; Hale, 2005, p. 115). Immediate response involves addressing the crisis as quickly as possible to shape the narrative (Hale, 2005, p. 115; Malone & Coombs, 2009, p. 121). Transparency is about being open and being honest in communication to maintain or rebuild trust (Cheung & Leung, 2016, p. 56). The scale and type of crises also plays a role in the used strategy. Communication strategies can include press releases, social media updates, press conferences, and more (Coombs & Holladay, 2010, p. 436).

The practice of crisis communication has been increasingly important during history (Frandsen & Johansen, 2020, p. 2). Especially in the current interconnected world where news spreads faster than ever (Lee, 2020, p. 2). The rise of digital media, especially social media, has altered the way crisis communication is conducted, offering both challenges and opportunities (Lee, 2020, p. 2). The speed and reach of social media can escalate a crisis rapidly, however, it also allows for quick and direct communication with the public (Lee, 2020, p. 2). Brands can use these digital platforms to provide quicker and more frequent updates, respond to concerns, and engage with their audience in a more personal manner (Lee, 2020, p. 2).

While there are numerous scholars who have researched crisis communication and have come up with theories about it, the Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT) by Coombs stands out. The theory offers insights on how organizations can communicate during a crisis to protect their reputation under consumers and other stakeholders (Coombs, 2007, p. 163). Coombs believes that because of the different nature, severity, and controllability of crises, each crisis communication strategy needs to be tailored accordingly to these differences (Coombs, 2007, p. 170). The theory also lays emphasis on the responsibility and accountability of a crisis (Coombs, 2007, p. 170). The level of responsibility and accountability can give a prediction of how the public will react to the crisis. This can then be used to determine what type of response strategy is best to use (Coombs, 2007, p. 170).

For stakeholders there is a big difference between a crisis that could have been prevented by an organization and a crisis caused by factors that an organization cannot control. SCCT therefore makes use of three primary types of crises based on their attributability and controllability (Coombs, 2007, p. 173). These three categories are: victim crisis, accident crisis, and preventable crisis (Claeys et al., 2010, p. 257; Coombs, 2007, p. 173). Victim crisis is used to categorize a crisis where the organization has very little attributability over it. In these cases, the organization is more seen as a victim (Claeys et al., 2010, p. 257; Coombs, 2007, p. 173). Examples of such a crisis can be natural disasters or external sabotage. Accident crisis is the category used to point out a crisis where the organization is partially responsible for it but still has limited control over the outcome (Claeys et al., 2010, p. 257; Coombs, 2007, p. 173). Examples of this can be unfortunate work accidents or technical failures. Lastly, the preventable crisis category is used to categorize a crisis where the organization is highly responsible for it (Claeys et al., 2010, p. 257). Examples of this can be managerial neglect or unethical conduct. After a crisis is put into one of these three categories the process of creating a communication plan starts.

In order to do this the SCCT outlines four main response strategies based on the severity of the crisis and the level of responsibility an organization holds (Coombs, 2007, p. 170; Park, 2017, p. 1). The first response strategy is called “denial”, it can be used in the case of a victim crisis where the organization has little responsibility (Coombs, 2007, p. 170; Park, 2017, p. 1). The denial strategy involves communicating on the little involvement the company has in the crisis in order to emphasize the victim status. The second strategy is “diminishment of responsibility”. Diminishment of responsibility may be used in the occurrence of an accident crisis (Coombs, 2007, p. 170; Park, 2017, p. 1). In this case the organization acknowledges its role in the crisis but emphasizes mitigating factors or external influences that contributed to the situation. The third strategy is called “rebuilding trust” (Coombs, 2007, p. 170; Park, 2017, p. 1). The rebuilding trust strategy can be used when a company is responsible for a crisis. This strategy involves accepting responsibility, expressing remorse, and taking proactive steps to rectify the situation and regain the trust of the stakeholders. The last strategy is called “bolstering” (Coombs, 2007, p. 170; Park, 2017, p. 1). This strategy can be used in a situation where the crisis poses a significant threat to the reputation of the organization. Bolstering aims to increase the organization’s positive image and reputation through highlighting its past achievements, values, and contributions to society (Coombs, 2007, p. 170; Park, 2017, p. 1).

In summary, the SCCT provides organizations with a framework that helps them to assess the nature of crises and selects appropriate communication strategies to manage them effectively. It also underlines the dynamic nature of crisis communication and underscores the importance of flexibility and adaptability in responding to evolving crisis situations.

2.3. Impact of Social Media on Crisis Communication

As already briefly mentioned in the previous paragraphs, the digital age has had a big impact on the way crisis management is conducted and how organizations communicate when dealing with a crisis (Lee, 2020, p. 2). Especially the rise and widespread implementation of social media has significantly transformed the landscape of crisis management and crisis communication (Lee, 2020, p. 2). Social media has provided a way for consumers and organizations to communicate with each other. This has been a big evolution from more traditional media, such as television and newspaper who predominantly used one-way communication (Istijanto & Purusottama, 2023, p. 3). One-way communication refers to the way of communication where, in this case, an organization puts out a message and the consumers receive the message (Istijanto & Purusottama, 2023, p. 3). The consumer, however, has no real option to give a quick reaction back leaving them without voice and the organization without feedback (Istijanto & Purusottama, 2023, p. 3). Traditional media, therefore, allowed organizations to have high control over the messages they released but it also came with significant drawbacks, such as the lack of direct feedback (Istijanto & Purusottama, 2023, p. 3). This absence of real-time engagement meant that organizations could not measure the effectiveness of their communication efforts during the initial hours of releasing the communication (Havârneanu et al., 2022, p. 6). This is especially disadvantageous during a crisis as quick reactions and adjustments to the communication are often necessary (Hale, 2005, p. 115; Malone & Coombs, 2009, p. 121).

The introduction of platforms such as X (Twitter), Instagram, and Facebook allowed for instant public feedback and direct interaction between organizations and their stakeholders to become possible (Ly-Le, 2014, p. 4). This marked a shift towards a more two-way communication that changed the way brands would communicate with their consumers (Ly-Le, 2014, p. 4). This change of communication also impacts crisis communication.

One of the most significant impacts of social media on crisis communication is the enhanced ability of organizations to respond instantaneously, which allows for the instant feedback that previously was not possible (Lee, 2020, p. 2). With real-time feedback, companies can quickly identify whether their messages are resonating well with the audience

or if adjustments are needed. This immediacy is invaluable in crisis situations, where conditions can evolve quickly and the need for quick responsiveness is crucial (Ly-Le, 2014, p. 5). The high involvement and heightened public scrutiny also increase the accountability and ethical standard organizations follow as every action they take is now closely watched by different stakeholders who do not hesitate to comment on it (Austin & Jin, 2017, p. 2). Social media platforms have not only increased the speed at which information travels but also expanded the scope of stakeholders that organizations must engage with during a crisis, showcasing that besides the benefits social media also made it more challenging (Taekke, 2017, p. 190). This rapid diffusion of both facts and misinformation has made some of the traditional crisis management theories more important than ever in order to keep up with the interconnected, media-saturated environment of today.

The explained SCCT by Coombs, for example, is well suited for the fast-paced nature of social media. As explained earlier, the SCCT makes clear that the strategy an organization should use during a crisis depends on the specifics of the situation and the perceived level of responsibility attributed to the organization (Coombs, 2007, p. 170). In today's fast paced media environment, the rapid response feature of SCCT becomes crucial (Coombs, 2010, p. 26). Any delayed reaction can allow the situation to spiral out of control as public narratives can form independently of any organizational input (Taekke, 2017, p. 191). The nature of social media necessitates for swift and effective communication to mitigate damage. It is, however, important to point out the shortcomings of the SCCT when it comes to operating in the digital age. Ki and Nekmat (2014, p. 142) explain that the highly interactive nature of social media users can overwhelm the ability for organizations to monitor the crisis and the SCCT is not very well adapted to this. By applying crisis monitoring or social listening this can be solved (Homann et al., 2023, p. 19). Social listening is the term used to describe the practice of organizations continuously scanning social media feeds to gauge public sentiment, identify emerging issues before they escalate, and tailor their communication strategies to address specific concerns (Stewart & Arnold, 2017, p. 2). This technique can be connected to Coombs (2010, p. 26) concept of crisis sensing. This is a component of the SCCT, which emphasizes the importance of early detection and response to crisis signals (Coombs, 2010, p. 26). This would create a framework to help organizations analyze real-time data from social media analytics, which are invaluable for sensing and effectively managing crises.

Another important theory, which can also be closely connected to the SCCT, is the Image Repair Theory by Benoit (1997, p. 178). This framework focuses on the strategies that individuals or organizations can employ to repair their reputation following a threat to their

image (Benoit, 1997, p. 177). The theory is based on the premise that maintaining a positive public image is crucial, and it offers five main strategies to mitigate damages from a crisis or accusations (Benoit, 1997, p.178). These strategies are, denial, evasion of responsibility, reducing offensiveness, corrective action, and mortification (Benoit, 1997, p. 179). Besides these five main categories Benoit (1997, p. 179) also introduces nine subcategories in order to give more crisis response options. All combined the Image Repair Theory offers a wide range of frameworks that can be used by organizations to come up with a tailored plan to mitigate negative consequences of a crisis (Benoit, 1997, p. 178). Parham (2021, p. 27) explains in a more recent paper that it is crucial to adapt these strategies to the digital context. The strategies must consider audience engagement and the speed at which messages are shared (Parham, 2021, p. 27). For instance, implementing corrective actions might now include real-time updates via X (Twitter), detailing the steps an organization is taking to resolve the crisis. This can be done by, for example, using hashtags to facilitate widespread dissemination.

Lastly the Dialogical Theory of Public Relations by Kent and Taylor (2002, p. 24) is well suited for the digital era. The theory lays emphasis on the importance of dialogue in fostering mutually beneficial relationships between organizations and their public (Kent & Taylor, 2002, p. 24). Social media enhances the usage of this theory by providing platforms where dialogue can occur in real time (Watkins, 2017, p. 3). Organizations can use these platforms not just to disseminate information but to engage directly with stakeholders, gather feedback, and adjust their strategies accordingly (Watkins, 2017, p. 3). This interactivity can enhance transparency and trust, which are especially critical during a crisis when stakeholders are actively seeking reassurance and clear, honest communication (Watkins, 2017, p. 3).

As briefly mentioned earlier, besides the advantages of social media in crisis communication, such as the option of quick responsiveness and broad reach, it also presents challenges. The volume and rate of information can sometimes overwhelm organizational response capabilities (Kaufhold et al., 2020, p. 3). Additionally, the viral nature of social media can worsen situations where misinformation is spread, complicating efforts to manage the crisis effectively (Huang et al., 2015, p. 977; Kaufhold et al., 2020, p. 3). Organizations must be adept not only in crafting messages but also in managing the flow of information and quickly correcting inaccuracies (Lee, 2020, p. 6). Furthermore, with social media being globalized and allowing messages to be seen by everybody in the world, issues of access and literacy can affect how different demographics receive and interpret crisis communication messages (Imran et al., 2015, p. 14). Organizations must consider these factors when choosing

platforms and crafting messages to ensure that communications are accessible and comprehensible to all stakeholders.

2.4. Consumer responses on Crisis Communication

Consumers and their reactions can be seen as one of the most important components of crisis communication. They play a big role in attributing the severity of a situation and to what extent an organization is responsible for it (Vassilikopoulou et al., 2018, p. 4). The importance of consumer reactions on the course of a crisis can be illustrated with the three stages of a crisis, explained earlier in the theoretical framework, by Coombs & Laufer (2018, p. 1). During the pre-crisis the concern and public scrutiny can cause a situation to escalate into a crisis. Then comes the crisis stage in which the way consumers react on the crisis communication can appease or worsen the situation, influencing the amount of control an organization has on the situation. Finally, in the post-crisis phase consumer reactions are important to evaluate the effectiveness of the crisis communication and the response strategy (Coombs & Laufer, 2018, p. 4). It is, therefore, important to get a better idea of how consumers responses are formed.

The responses consumers have to crisis communication can be connected to psychology (Zhang & Wei, 2011, p. 113). During a crisis, consumers often experience heightened emotions, including anger, sympathy or loyalty (Zhang & Wei, 2011, p. 114). These different states of emotion contribute to the way they react and perceive the communication of a brand (Zhang & Wei, 2011, p. 114). These psychological factors must be considered in order to best inform the consumers in order to maintain their trust.

Analyzing case studies can give valuable insights into consumer responses. For example, if a company that must recall a product and directly communicates this with their consumers in a transparent and apologetic way, the trust among those consumers will be higher than if the company communicates in a defensive or evasive way (Chen et al., 2009, p. 217). Another example is seen in service disruptions. As Wei et al. (2015, p. 126) researched the Volkswagen crisis in China they found that transparent communication about the issue and timely updates are often met with understanding and patience from consumers, as opposed to frustration and distrust when left uninformed. These responses show the importance of the content and tone of crisis communication in the shaping of consumer attitudes.

An important factor that also needs to be considered is the impact of different cultures on the perceptions and reactions of consumers on crisis communication. Culture significantly

influences consumer responses to crisis communication, as it shapes the perceptions, values, and behaviors of individuals (Mattila & Patterson, 2004, p. 196). This can have an impact on the communication style used for a particular audience (Mattila & Patterson, 2004, p. 196). Japan and Arab countries, for example, tend to prefer subtle and indirect messages with high context (Haruta & Hallahan, 2003, p. 128). So called, low context cultures, such as Germany and the Netherlands, on the other hand prefer directness and clarity in the communication (Lim & Urakami, 2018, p. 628). During a crisis, organizations, therefore, must take these characteristics into account to make sure the message is well received and does not shock or offend anybody. Some of the cultural dimensions created by Hofstede can serve as useful frameworks to analyze and get an idea of how different countries expect to receive their messages (Hofstede, 2011, p. 19). The dimension of uncertainty avoidance in culture, for example, shows that cultures with high uncertainty avoidance prefer clear, detailed information and are less tolerant of ambiguity (Hofstede, 2011, p. 10). A crisis communication strategy should therefore include frequent updates and definitive actions, thereby demanding more structured and assertive communication from organizations (Hofstede, 2011, p. 10; Merkin, 2006, p. 214). In today's digital age, where social media and the internet have made information almost globally available for everyone, understanding these cultural nuances becomes more difficult but also even more critical for effective crisis management.

It is clear that crisis communication strategies cannot be exactly the same for every crisis as they have varied impacts on consumer responses. Because each crisis is different the reactions by the audience are also different. The perceived responsibility consumers attribute to an organization plays a big role on the public perceptions and reactions they have. The language, location and culture are also some of the aspects that need to be taken into consideration when conducting crisis communication. Literature does, however, show that strategies focused on empathy and responsibility tend to create trust and loyalty, while strategies that lack these elements can lead to skepticism and negative perceptions (Zhang & Wei, 2011, p. 114). Besides this, the chosen platform to communicate on also plays a role. Social media platforms allow for more interactive and direct responses, the engaging nature of these platforms can help reassure consumers more when comparing it to traditional media (Kimibeji & Wabwire, 2021, p. 43). Understanding these dynamics will help brands effectively use crisis communication.

2.5. Humor in Crisis Communication

The term humor is seen as a psychological phenomenon that happens when a situation triggers a person to feel a sense of amusement often paired with laughter (Wu et al., 2020, p. 2). This gives a pleasurable emotional response combined with a feeling of joy (Wu et al., 2020, p. 2). The use of humor by brands has been going on for a long time. They use it to capture attention, make messages more memorable or to try and create an overall positive image of the brand (Eisend, 2009, p. 193). The introduction of social media platforms, in recent years, has greatly influenced the way brand use humor in their communication (Akbar & El-Gohary, 2021, p. 2). The platforms are used to try and create a viral video or post that makes the name of the brand more known which enhances the visibility of the brand (Akbar & El-Gohary, 2021, p. 5). The strategic use of humor in branding goes beyond just solely seeking more attention. It also plays a crucial role in differentiating a brand from others (Chattopadhyay & Basu, 1990, p. 475). Standing out as a brand has become especially important in today's hyper competitive and crowded marketplace (Akbar & El-Gohary, 2021, p. 2). By using humor into their communication, brands can differentiate themselves as unique and create a relatable, humanized image that resonates with consumers. This approach not only enhances the memorability of the brand but also creates a sense of loyalty among consumers (Akbar & El-Gohary, 2021, p. 2). The study by Warren and Berger (2011, p. 712) explains that humor increases the likelihood of social sharing, thereby amplifying the reach of brand messages significantly (Warren & Berger, 2011, p. 712). This makes humoristic content prone to be shared by the public (Warren & Berger, 2011, p. 712). The sharing of branded content by the public can also be referred to as earned media, which is very valuable as it promotes the brand in an indirect way which can increase the trust and attract new customers (Stephen & Galak, 2012, p. 1). Consumers are more likely to buy products that are used or mentioned by people they know (Stephen & Galak, 2012, p. 1; Villarroel Ordenes et al., 2018, p. 4). This peer-to-peer sharing mechanism can be particularly effective in digital environments where consumers are bombarded with vast amounts of content daily (Stephen & Galak, 2012, p. 1; Villarroel Ordenes et al., 2018, p. 4). Humor, therefore, can stand out in the content mass, making brand messages more likely to be consumed and shared.

While mostly used in advertising, humor can also be used as a way of crisis communication (Yu et al., 2022, p. 2). Already briefly mentioned in the introduction, the use of humor to communicate during a crisis is rather unconventional. A crisis is often a delicate situation and clear communication to the public is crucial in order to try and prevent any negative reactions or harmful backlash (Yu et al., 2022, p. 2). As humor can be interpreted

differently by anyone it can be complicated and high of risk to use in such delicate situations (Xiao & Yu, 2022, p. 2; Yu et al., 2022, p. 3). However, when done correctly it can appease audiences and lighten up the mood (Xiao & Yu, 2022, p. 2; Yu et al., 2022, p. 2). In order to successfully use humor as a way of crisis communication a lot of planning and consideration is required.

Firstly, it is important to have a good overview of the crisis: what happened, why did it happen, who is involved, what are the consequences, etc. (Coombs, 2007, p. 165). Without this information it is very difficult to know if the use of humor is appropriate compared to the severity of the crisis (Vigsø, 2013, p. 130). If, for example, the crisis has injured people or has severely harmed the environment it is not advised to come up with a lighthearted humoristic response. In that case, the use of humor would be extremely unethical and undermine the gravity of the situation which would worsen the crisis and attract a lot of negative attention (Vigsø, 2013, p. 130). The goal should not be to use humor for the sake of it, it should be used responsibly with a certainty it is not disrespectful towards the entities that are directly involved by the crisis. It is also important to know the, already existing, relation between the organization and its consumers (Coombs, 2007, p. 165). For a brand that is already well-known for its light-hearted content it might be easier to incorporate humor than for a brand that is known for its strictly professional tone. This being said, a brand with a usually professional tone might surprise people with a humoristic communication which could play out well.

Secondly, the timing and dosage of humor can play a big role in how it is received by the audience (Pollio, 1995, p. 379). If humor is used too soon or too late it can be perceived as insensitive or it can miss the opportunity to alleviate the tension. This relates not only to the use of humor in crisis communication but to the use of humor in general. Similarly, if the dosage of humor is off the communication can seem like the organization does not take the crisis seriously (Pollio, 1995, p. 381). Lastly, it is important to be aware of the risks and the long-term impact a failed humorous communication can have on the organization (Waisanen, 2015, p. 350). When done correctly, humor can humanize a brand and strengthen consumer relationships, leading to increased loyalty and trust (Meyer, 2000, p. 317; Berger et al., 2004, p. 827). However, even if all the steps are followed it is possible that the communication is interpreted in the wrong way causing lasting damage to the reputation of the organization, requiring significant efforts to rebuild public trust (Waisanen, 2015, p. 350). Brands must, therefore, consider how the use of humor will align with their long-term reputation

management strategies and whether it will contribute positively to their brand equity in the aftermath of the crisis.

The adoption of social media has greatly influenced the way brands use humor to communicate (Barry & Graça, 2018, p. 160). The platforms allow organizations to have more a more informal connection with their consumers (Taecharungroj & Nueangjamnong, 2015, p. 289). Brands, now, often incorporate memes, witty comments, clever hashtags, or humorous videos to add some fun into their messages. These forms of humor used in communication not only keep the audience engaged but also create a relatable and approachable image, consumers might have the feeling that the messages are similar to the ones they could personally send to friends and family (Taecharungroj & Nueangjamnong, 2015, p. 289). This is made possible by the interactive nature of social media. Especially on TikTok some brands have opted to post short videos completely unrelated to their product line in the hope to go viral and gain brand awareness. Ryanair and Subway Surfers are two examples of brands that have managed to capitalize on it. Besides communication in general, organizations have also started using humor more frequently in their crisis communication strategy (Xiao et al., 2017, p. 3). The viral nature of social media can help these messages spread quickly and appease consumers (Xiao et al., 2017, p. 3).

3. Method

This research will make use of qualitative content analysis as it is suitable for the interpretation and the analyzing of a qualitative database (Elo et al., 2014, p. 1; Schreier et al., 2019, p. 2). The method is known for its systematic approach of analyzing textual, verbal, or visual data (Elo et al., 2014, p. 1; Schreier et al., 2019, p. 2). The essence of the method lies in the way it takes apart large and complex databases into codes to create a better understanding by giving those codes a specific meaning (Elo et al., 2014, p. 1; Schreier et al., 2019, p. 15). Many existing studies use qualitative research methods to research data found on social media, which makes it a relevant method to use for this research. Andreotta et al. (2019, p. 1769) and Xu et al. (2020, p. 2), for example, both use qualitative methods to analyze social media posts for their research. Similarly, the studies by du Plessis (2018, p. 8) and Pace et al. (2017, p. 2) use qualitative content analysis to research how consumers react to different crisis communication strategies on social media. By analyzing the perceptions consumers have on the use of humor in crisis communication this study will further contribute to already existing literature on the topic. As this study will investigate perceptions on social media it will also get its data from there. More specifically, the platform X, formerly known as Twitter, will be used to gather the data. The choice for this specific platform was made for multiple reasons. The first one being the extensive number of users it has and rather high user engagement, with over 550 million monthly users, it is one of the biggest platforms of its sort (Duarte, 2023). Secondly, brands and organizations often use X as their first way of communicating a crisis or issue to the public (Okazaki et al., 2019, p. 1). Lastly, the platform gives the option to use a lot of searching criteria which makes it easier to find specific data on a topic. The data collected from X will consist of textual posts. Therefore, textual analysis will be employed to analyze the data.

Textual analysis is known for being efficient in researching public sentiment and discourse, it is also very scalable and can be used to research large databases (Aisopos et al., 2011, p. 9). Flexibility in how well it can adapt to the needs of a particular study is also an attribute. These qualities make textual analysis a suitable method to use for this study (White & Marsh, 2006, p. 23). Schreier et al. (2019, p. 6) also states that textual analysis can narrow down a large data set to the specific information needed because of a categorization and coding process. As the number of collected tweets is substantial, this will be a great attribute in order to successfully analyze the data. Furthermore, qualitative content analysis is characterized by its methodological approach, this ensures a highly structured analysis of the dataset to best answer the research question (Elo et al., 2014, p. 6; Schreier et al., 2019, p. 14).

3.1. Sampling Strategy and Data Collection

A total of 607 tweets were collected from the platform X. All the collected tweets are user responses/reaction on the crisis communication conducted by the two cases. The tweets were manually collected by using the advanced search functionality on X. Both cases being researched used hashtags, therefore the data has been found by searching for those hashtags during the particular timeframe the crisis unfolded. Besides hashtags, tweets have also been collected directly from the responses on a crisis communication tweet by the company. The selected tweets are all related in some way to the crisis communication of each case and therefore represent the user perceptions.

The first case chosen is about the crisis communication KFC deployed during a major chicken shortage that resulted in closing a substantial amount of their restaurants in the UK. The issues started when KFC signed a deal with DHL to be their main supply delivery company on February 14, 2018. Two days after on the 16th of February the problems started. Due to software and staffing issues DHL started having logistical issues which led to them not being able to deliver the needed supplies to many KFC franchises. These supply chain issues lead to the closing of more than half of the 900 KFC restaurants in the UK. On the 20th of February KFC released an official statement addressing the issues and explained they were caused due to complications surrounding their recent partnership with DHL. One day after, on February 21st, KFC used traditional media, in the form of a newspaper page, to put out a statement that would make this crisis famous. They rearranged the letters of their brand to read "FCK" on one of their chicken buckets and published full-page ads in newspapers with a witty apology, gaining widespread media coverage and public support. While the initial communication was done on newspapers it quickly became a viral talking topic on social media. Over the next few days KFC shared a dedicated website where consumers could find updates about the closed stores and at the start of March nearly all stores were reopened once again. The aftermath resulted in KFC revising their supply chain to make sure no issue of the sort would reoccur. In order to collect the needed consumer responses surrounding this case the hashtags #KFCCrisis, #KFCChickenCrisis and #KFCClosed were used on Twitter. The chosen time was set on February 2018 as the crisis unfolded during that period. Because the initial crisis communication was released in newspapers the use of hashtags was the easiest way to track back the collected data.

The second case chosen for this research is the crisis communication by Aldi UK on a lawsuit by Marks & Spencer (M&S). In March 2021, M&S filed a lawsuit against Aldi UK, alleging that Aldi's Cuthbert the Caterpillar cake infringed on M&S's Colin the Caterpillar

cake trademark. M&S claimed that the similarities could mislead consumers and damage its brand. By early April 2021, news of the lawsuit broke in the media, drawing public attention. M&S emphasized that it wanted Aldi to remove Cuthbert from sale and agree not to sell anything similar in the future. In mid-April 2021, Aldi responded on social media with humor and a light-hearted approach, including the hashtag #FreeCuthbert. This campaign portrayed Cuthbert as an underdog and generated significant public engagement and support, aiming to mitigate reputational damage and turn the lawsuit into a PR opportunity. By late April 2021, Aldi continued its social media campaign, posting memes, engaging with customers, and even challenging M&S to a charity bake-off. This humorous and proactive communication strategy kept the public engaged and largely supportive of Aldi. To collect the data on this case the hashtag #FreeCuthbert was used, and the tweets were collected during the month of April 2021. In this case the whole crisis communication was done on X, therefore direct responses to the company tweets are also included in the database. The tweets from the organizations itself have not been included in the database as the focus of this study is on the consumer perceptions. While not in the database the crisis communication will still be evaluated in order to get a better grasp at kind of humor and strategies were used.

As the tweets were collected manually only the ones that related to this study were picked for the research data set, this was done by using purposive sampling (Campbell et al., 2020, p. 2; Elo et al., 2014). Purposive sampling is suitable for this as it allows for a selective data collection process were, in this case, only the tweets relating to the crisis communication could be selected (Campbell et al., 2020, p. 2; Elo et al., 2014, p. 4). The method ensures that the data sample is able to contribute to answering the research question. Especially on social media, where irrelevant or misleading posts can overshadow significant insights due to the vast amount of available content, the attributes of purposive sampling become a necessity (Campbell et al., 2020, p. 2). This approach not only enhances the relevance of the data analyzed but also strengthens the findings of the study by focusing on the most significant data (Campbell et al., 2020, p. 2; Elo et al., 2014, p. 4).

3.2. Operationalization

The research question contains two main concepts that need to be operationalized in order to make them more researchable. These concepts are humor and consumer perceptions.

Humor is the first concept that needs to be further discussed. Wu et al. (2020, p. 2) defines humor as a psychological phenomenon that triggers a person to have a sense of amusement often paired with laughter. Humor can take on multiple forms, each with unique

characteristics and effects on audiences (Dyrel, 2009, p. 1284). Some examples of different types of humor are, irony, puns/wordplay and parody (Dyrel, 2009, p. 1284). This research made use of the definition of humor and its different types in order to categorize the humor used in each of the two cases. Doing this made it possible to analyze how different consumer reactions are when it comes to different types of humor in crisis communication. This helped to gain a better understanding of what types of humor work best in crisis communication and how to use humor in these situations. It is, however, important to mention that humor is very subjective, what makes one person laugh might not resonate with another. The sense of humor people have varies based on their personal experiences and cultural background (Berger, 2013, p. 212). Different characteristics of the potential effects humor can have on audiences, as outlined by Meyer (2000), were used in the coding process to gain insight into the impact of humor regarding the two analyzed cases.

Secondly, consumer perception will be further clarified. As the data of this research is based on consumer perceptions it is crucial to have a good understanding of the concept. Consumer perceptions refer to the way consumers interpret information to form opinions and views about the world around them, this often regards, brands, products and services (McMillan & Hwang, 2002, p. 29). Understanding consumer perceptions is vital for companies as it helps them adapt their marketing and communication strategies to better meet the needs and preferences of their target audience (Garcia-Collart, 2023, p. 8). Consumer perceptions can be shaped by a number of factors (Nijkraake et al., 2015, p. 81). When it comes to crisis communication the perceptions can be influenced by the tone, the timing and the content of a message (Nijkraake et al., 2015, p. 81). Furthermore, the channel on which the message was released and the already existing image a stakeholder has with an organization also play a big role (Nijkraake et al., 2015, p. 81). In the case of this research consumer perceptions were categorized in three main codes. These codes are: positive reactions, negative reactions and neutral reactions. The creation of these codes formed the backbone of the data analysis and all the different subcodes that were created can be retraced to these overarching themes, as displayed in appendix A. Understanding the essence of consumer perceptions and how they get shaped was therefore imperative in order to analyze all the tweets from the dataset.

3.3. Analysis

As mentioned at the start of the methodology the analysis of consumer perceptions on the use of humor in crisis communication was conducted using the qualitative content analysis

approach. The analyzed dataset contained tweets related to two cases, the KFC UK chicken shortage in 2018 and the Aldi cake crisis in 2021. These tweets were categorized into two segments, with the first half relating to KFC and the second to Aldi. With the research question in mind the first stage of coding started, this was done by following the steps outlined by (Schreier et al., 2019, p. 7). The initial coding stage involved a broad review of the tweets to build an initial coding frame. This frame put forward three overarching categories. These categories are positive, negative, and neutral reactions. The positive reactions included the tweets that praised the crisis communication in any way shape or form. These responses ranged from positivity towards the use of humor, interactions with the humor, general positivism, etc.. These tweets expressed emotional responses of amusement or happiness. The negative reactions encompassed tweets that criticized the crisis communication. This could be anger, frustration, critical about the humor, etc.. Lastly, the neutral reactions consisted of informational or off-topic tweets that did not directly have an opinion on the crisis communication itself. These three categories were then further refined into subcategories to capture more specific nuances in the responses. Nearly all the collected data can be classified in one of these three categories, with positive reactions being the biggest with a combined total of 466 tweets.

After establishing the initial coding frame, a more detailed analysis was conducted to ensure the coding categories were comprehensive and that the data was not overlapping in different subcategories. Each category and subcategory was clearly defined by thoroughly describing it and connecting it with examples. These steps were taken to ensure consistency in the coding process.

In the case of this research both deductive and inductive coding took place. Deductive coding was guided by pre-existing theories and literature on crisis communication and humor, for example, Benoit's Image Repair Theory was one of the theories used during the coding process (Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2006, p. 83). Inductive coding, on the other hand, allowed more freedom in the creation of new codes, such as self-promotion which is a subcategory of the neutral code (Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2006, p. 83).

The coding process itself took place on Excel and was mostly done manually. While time consuming it allowed for a deep understanding of the entire database and helped conducting a refined, nuanced and thorough analysis. In order to have a good overview of the results of the analysis a code tree was created (appendix A). This helped illustrate the hierarchical structure of the categories and subcategories.

The qualitative content analysis provided a detailed understanding of consumer reactions to humor in crisis communication. The mixed-method approach, combining both inductive and deductive strategies, ensured a thorough exploration of the data. The findings contribute to the broader understanding of crisis communication strategies and their impact on consumer perceptions and engagement.

3.4. Validity and Reliability

Validity and reliability are crucial concepts in qualitative analysis in order to ensure that the research findings are credible and trustworthy. Validity refers to the accuracy and truthfulness of the findings, meaning the extent to which the results truly represent the data being studied (Heale & Twycross, 2015, p. 1). Reliability, on the other hand, refers to the consistency and dependability of the research process and outcomes, ensuring that the findings can be replicated under similar conditions (Heale & Twycross, 2015, p. 2). There are multiple strategies that can help ensure the validity and reliability of qualitative research (Seale & Silverman, 1997, p. 380). Peer debriefing, for example, is the process in which the research process and findings are reviewed with a fellow researcher that did not participate in the making of the study (Spall, 1998, p. 280). Fellow researchers can look at a study and the results with a more unbiased opinion which enhances the overall credibility of the study (Spall, 1998, p. 280). Systematic and transparent coding is also very important to ensure reliable and valid results (Seale & Silverman, 1997, p. 381).

In the case of this study, which analyzed Twitter user responses to the KFC and Aldi crises in the UK, ensuring validity and reliability was crucial. By following Schreier's et al. (2019, p. 7) method for the coding process a thorough approach to qualitative content analysis was ensured. Schreier et al. (2019, p. 7) emphasize the importance of a systematic coding frame, which is both comprehensive and exclusive, to ensure consistency and accuracy in data analysis. After completing the coding process the results were peer reviewed by a fellow master student to make sure no mistakes were made. As the two cases used in this study happened in the UK the consumer responses used in the database are predominantly also from the UK. This makes it easier to compare the findings as the cultural differences are rather small.

Lastly, the collected tweets were collected ethically by respecting the privacy of the X users. While the data was public, extra steps were taken to ensure no names, ethnicities, age or gender were extracted

4. Results and Discussion

4.1. Results

After completing the analysis of the database consisting of 307 KFC Crisis consumer reaction tweets and 300 Aldi Crisis consumer tweets interesting insights emerged in relation to the aim of this study. The user tweets were analyzed to get a better idea how humor as a crisis communication strategy is being received by consumers. In both analyzed cases, the overall results were largely positive towards the use of humor in crisis communication. This section will provide a detailed overview of the analyzed results which will showcase the differences and similarities in reactions of both cases. The results part will be divided into three main sections. These sections are positive, negative and neutral reactions. In those sections the three overarching categories will be discussed by touching upon all the related sub codes.

It is, however, important to stress that the two cases analyzed represent different types of crises. The KFC crisis, which was a supply chain crisis, resulted in the closing of hundreds of KFC restaurants in the UK. This impacted the KFC consumers who could not order KFC food in these restaurants anymore, the crisis therefore had tangible negative consequences for these consumers. On the other hand, the Aldi case, which can be classified as an intellectual property crisis, did not directly influence the consumers. All stores remained open and all products were still available. The risk Aldi faced consisted more out of reputational damages. Due to these differences in the nature of the crises and the respective communication strategies employed, the reactions observed in each case did not all overlap. While many KFC consumers were focused on the immediate inconvenience and were forgiving once the issue was resolved, Aldi consumers were more concerned with defending the brand amidst the legal dispute. Thus, some subcategories of reactions were unique to each case.

4.1.1. Positive reactions

In the first section the positive reactions on the crisis communication from both cases will be presented. The tweets that have been analyzed in this section are all positive to the brand in some way following the crisis communication. This can be relating to the humor, giving good feedback, praising the pr/social media teams, the crisis communication in general, or even a sudden new interest/craving in the brand. Some of the codes have been applied to both cases as similarities between answers have come forward. Codes that are only assigned to one of the two cases have also been created as both companies are different in terms of identity, crisis, and their communication. Around 81% of the responses gathered

from the KFC case turned out to be positive, the Aldi case had a lower percentage with around 72% positive responses.

A recurring theme that took place in the responses of both cases was a high praise to the personal relation team or social media team that was responsible for the crisis communication. A substantial number of tweets jokingly said that the teams deserved pay raises and more recognition. A respondent of the Aldi crisis illustrated this in the following way, “*Your PR team need a pay rise, never laughed so much #marks&snitches 🤔🤔.*” Similarly, a tweet regarding the KFC crisis says the following: “*Please tell me your marketing team got a pay raise for the way they’ve handled the #KFCcrisis makes me laugh every time a new graphic released 🤔🤔 An example of how to handle a business disaster in the best way! Well done @KFC_UKI*”. These are two of many tweets that appreciate the use of humor in the communication and give recognition to the person or group that, they think, is responsible for it. While these tweets were present in both of the analyzed cases they were more frequent in the Aldi case. It is important to note that reactions from multiple AldiUK tweets were analyzed, this was not the case for the KFC case as the initial crisis communication did not take place on the social media platform.

The positive responses also praise the use of humor in the crisis communication by acknowledging the fact that it is daring and risky to use humor as a form of crisis communication. This is especially noticeable regarding the KFC crisis, tweets such as “*This KFC apology, is one many clients would not risk. On PR crisis management, KFC nailed this. #KFCcrisis*” and “*Dear @KFC_UKI: you took a brand risk with this apology and it absolutely paid off. Well done.*” showcase this realization by the audience that using humor is not the most common method of crisis communication. While these tweets are a bit less common in the Aldi case the reactions there also praise the out of the box crisis communication. This became clear with tweets such as the following “*Top class marketing 😊! Never seen a company be so playful about something and get so much fab publicity! Well deserved @AldiUK 🤔 #FreeCuthbert.*” The tweet mentions it has never seen a company communicating in such a way when it comes to responding to a crisis. Besides the acknowledgment of the risk taken by using humor in crisis management, the responses also mention how culture may have taken part in the great reception of the communication. In both cases tweets mentioned how the humor is typically British and that it may have backlashed in other countries. A very good example of such a tweet is the following “*Love it. Although this apology would not fly in the US. Americans have lost their sense of humour. Political*

correctness and all that. #KFCCrisis". This tweet lays emphasis on the fact that it might not have been accepted in the same way in a different country, the US in this case.

Another positive reaction that occurred in both of the cases was the sudden craving of the product that was talked about in the media. As the two cases involved food-related products consumers mentioned they wanted it more than usual. Especially with the Aldi case the interest of suddenly buying a Cuthbert the Caterpillar cake was high. Tweets such as *"Whoever is running your social media is killing it with the responses; bravo! 🙌 I'm off to buy me a caterpillar #FreeCuthbert."* and *"I feel like going to buy one now 🤤!"* showcased this heightened interest in buying the Aldi cake. In the case of KFC multiple tweets were similar, stating the crisis had peaked their interest in buying KFC, *"Literally never wanted KFC more in my life this week! #KFCCrisis"*. These tweets show that for a group of people the crisis communication managed to not only mitigate the damages among consumers but even turn it into a positive making them want the product.

A common way in which consumers also positively interacted with the crisis communication was by replying with their own humor. The KFC crisis had plenty examples of these tweets that used mostly puns or wordplay relating to the crisis. Puns such as *"Finger flipping good apology"* or attempts to be funny for instance *"The chicken crossed the road, just not to the restaurants 🤪"* showed the interaction the KFC crisis communication created with the public. The use of humor as a reaction on the communication was a bit less common during the Aldi crisis. In the case of the Aldi crisis a particular type of response that often came back was siding with Aldi by critiquing M&S which filed the lawsuit against Aldi. Examples of this are, *"🤔🤔 just shows how pathetic M&S are really .. i mean look at all the caterpillar cakes in other stores 🤪♀."* and *"yes they are!!....it's showing M&S how ridiculous and petty they really are.. thanks Aldi for all the laughs 😄!"*. These tweets mention adjectives such as pathetic and petty to describe M&S. In these instances, the consumers are defending Aldi by directly criticizing the competitor. In similar fashion when humor was used it related more to making fun of M&S by using puns such as *"Marks & Snitches"*.

The remainder, and biggest percentage, of positive reactions praised the crisis communication in general by mentioning how well it has been conducted. This was done by reacting with laughing emojis, giving praise, forgiveness and acceptance. These positive reactions make out around 63% of the KFC positive reactions and 61% of the Aldi positive reactions. This highlights the success of both crisis communications.

4.1.2. Negative reactions

While the majority of reactions were positive there were still people that did not like the way both organizations communicated during the crisis. In both cases a bit less than 10% (9.5% Aldi and 9% KFC) of the respondents critiqued the way of communicating. The main subcategory consists out of negative reactions on the use of humor, this was the case for both the KFC and the Aldi crisis. The rest of the negative reactions are more specific to each case and have not as much overlapping.

In the two cases analyzed in this study the use of humor has been critiqued. The negative reactions to the KFC crisis often critiqued the company's communication strategy. Several tweets suggested that the founder of the KFC franchise (Colonel Sanders) would have likely disapproved of the handling of the situation. For example, one tweet stated, *"Fire your entire marketing dept! Colonel Harlan Sanders would be turning in his grave at the gimmicky crap ur cranking out. It's about the #Food! Reba as the Colonel?! Puhleez! 😏 #EpicFail #KFCcrisis"* This sentiment, highlighting the notion that the crisis management tarnished the legacy of Colonel Sanders was a recurring theme in the negative responses. Other critiques also mention the use of bad language used, which was present in the KFC communication. This was made clear with tweets such as the following, *"As a woman who cares about children & teaching them appropriate language, I don't like this at all Tham! They needed creative input from nice moms. 📖 🌀 #KFCcrisis."* This tweet refers to the rearranging the letters of KFC to FCK, the negative reactions pointed out this is was unacceptable for such a big brand as KFC and that it could be a bad example for kids.

The negative reactions relating to the Aldi case communication mentioned the unprofessionalism of Aldi to call out M&S publicly. The following tweet for example mentions that ultimately Aldi is in the wrong and that they are not handling it well: *"This is completely immature - no respectable business would be taking the piss out of being slapped with copyright infringement - especially when they have previous in this with Charlotte Tilbury!"* Multiple other tweets have a similar opinion and think that you cannot be making fun of a brand that sues you for copyright infringement. Some reactions even go as far as saying that the way Aldi is inciting their followers to attack and bully M&S. Nearly all the negative Aldi comments are relating to the fact that they are the one in the wrong and that they have no place to try and make M&S look bad.

The other negative reactions related to the KFC case varied more widely. In addition to the previously discussed criticisms, there were also mentions from pro-vegan individuals

who emphasized that killing chickens is no laughing matter. For example, one tweet stated, *“The real chicken crisis is the thousands upon thousands of chickens killed every single week. When we could simply eat seitan instead. #KFCcrisis #KFC #BeKind #vegan,”* suggesting that the chicken shortage was not a real crisis compared to the ongoing slaughter of chickens for food. Besides pro-vegan tweets and criticisms, there were also negative reactions from consumers upset about KFC running out of chicken. For instance, one customer tweeted, *“@KFC_UKI_Help Not happy about the KFC stores being shut through lack of chicken products. Normally I’d pop into Kilmarnock after work and get some hot wings or another tasty chicken snack but, not this week! 😞👉👎”* This tweet highlights the inconvenience faced by customers who had to find alternative lunch options and did not find the crisis communication sufficient to forgive them.

4.1.3. Neutral reactions

The last main category of the results focuses on neutral reactions. The neutral reactions consist of tweets that discuss the crisis communication without giving a distinctly positive or negative opinion about it. These neutral reactions do not even have to be opinions, they can also simply be observations or statements. The KFC case had around 10% classified as neutral reactions, while the Aldi case had around 18% classified as neutral reactions. There are few similarities between the neutral reactions of both cases, as most are unique to one case or the other. It is, however, important to report them as they contribute to the research on the audience’s thought processes.

The main subcategory of the neutral reactions that recurred in both cases was the suspicion that the crises were fabricated as marketing stunts. Due to the widespread attention the crisis communication gained in the two analyzed cases, some people became suspicious of its sincerity. A tweet regarding the KFC crisis says, *“I’d almost forgotten that KFC still existed. Is the #KFCcrisis a #SupplyChain cock-up or a #PRNews masterpiece?”* This person, who apparently rarely thinks about KFC, was reminded of their existence due to the extensive media coverage surrounding the crisis communication. Similar tweets regarding the Aldi case were even more common. For instance, *“I’m wondering if this is a coordinated PR stunt by M&S and Aldi.”* is an example of such a tweet. Some respondents, however, pointed out that because organizations like DHL and M&S were receiving criticism, it was likely not a coordinated stunt by all parties.

The most recurring neutral reaction relating to the KFC crisis was the promotion of restaurants or other food. Due to the closing of nearly half of the KFC restaurants in the UK

and the media attention, some people tried to use the hype for their own benefit. These tweets ranged from promoting chicken restaurants, vegan alternatives, and self-made food. Examples of such tweets are, “*Who needs #KFCCrisis when you can do @philvickerytv fried chicken !! I did chicken breast strips. Delicious recipe even better than #kfc ! Colonel Phil I salute you 🍗*” and “*No crisis Comms required from #MommaChoudry as there is no chicken shortage #KFCCrisis #KFC.*” This was the biggest theme when it came to the neutral reactions regarding the KFC case. Other reactions included making jokes about the situation, comments about the role of DHL in the crisis, and unbiased comments about the situation.

Regarding the Aldi case, the neutral reactions were especially focused on the fact that a cake caused so much drama. Tweets such as, “*Only the UK can go bonkers about a bloody caterpillar 🐛.*” and “*What’s the fuss about? Caterpillar cakes are a thing everywhere! 🍰🍰!*” illustrate this sentiment, questioning why it is an issue in the first place. There are also some more serious reactions offering Aldi tips to use in order to win the lawsuit. The rest of the neutral reactions consist of comments about the situation, using adjectives such as “daring” and “bold” to describe Aldi's response and making jokes that made fun commenting about the situation without picking a side.

4.2. Discussion

The results section shed light on the outcomes of the data analysis. The following section will provide a discussion in order to connect the finding to already existing literature and similar theories about this topic. By comparing the findings with known assumptions, a good overview can be created on how effective the use of humor is in crisis communication. The following part will therefore extensively discuss the results in order to be able to draw a conclusion and answer the research question.

4.2.1. Use of humor in crisis communication

The main goal of this research is to find out how consumers react to the use of humor in crisis communication. From the results of the two analyzed cases, it is clear to say that the use of humor has been well received by the audiences. In both cases most of the analyzed reactions were positive towards the communication. It is, however, crucial to dive deeper and look at specific outcomes of the results to get a better view of how much of these positive reactions can be attributed to humor and what other factors play a role. In order to do this, studies that discuss the use of humor in similar situation will be used to get a grasp of the main characteristics and benefits humor can have on the outcome of the crisis communication.

Through many studies humor has been proven to have many benefits when used in (crisis) communication. It can, for example, help create a sense of trust between stakeholders, reduce tensions, enhance engagement, and humanize or make an organization more relatable (Meyer, 2000, p. 317; Berger et al., 2004, p. 827). These are only some examples from many characteristics humor has on how a message is received by the audience. In order to be able to measure the impact humor has had on the audience reactions concerning the two cases used in this paper these characteristics can be retraced in the results. As crisis management is a particular form of communication only specific characteristics of humor relating to crisis communication will be used. Humanization, relatability, diffusion of tension, positive public perception, and engagement will therefore be focused on.

Starting with humanization, in both cases reactions showcased a strong sense of humanization towards both brands. The clearest examples of this are the tweets that explicitly mention the personal relations of social media team to praise them for their great crisis communication. Acknowledging the people behind the scenes can be seen as a way for the audience to realize that behind the brand there are actually people instead of seeing the brand as an entity that does not involve any human touch. In the study by Meyer (2000, p. 317) an emphasis is laid on how humor can make a brand more relatable to people. The overall benefits of a brand being perceived as human is direct influence of this on consumer trust, likability and overall image (Thomson, 2006, p. 104-105). It is clear that in both cases analyzed humor has achieved making the organizations more approachable and relatable.

The second characteristic is diffusion of tension. The use of humor to mitigate conflicts is a well-researched topic. The study by Norrick and Spitz (2008, p. 1683) extensively touches upon this subject and explains that humor can be used as a tool to appease the emotions. By amusing or making people laugh the attention gets taken away from the initial point of tension which gives more time and less pressure to rectify the situation. In the case of the KFC crisis humor has definitively played a big part in diffusing the tension as consumer seemed to have more attention to the form of the crisis communication than the actual crisis. A big part of the reactions only talked about the way they communicated and did not even mention the chicken shortage. On the other hand, for the Aldi crisis there could be an argument made that the humor Aldi used in their communication increased the tensions. This is because their communication made fun and targeted M&S. This way of communicating caused Aldi to be seen as a victim by vilifying M&S, this completely turned the starting situation where M&S sued Aldi for copyright infringement. A lot of the reactions by the audience therefore critiqued and made fun of M&S, resulting in two consumer bases pitched

against each other. The results of Aldi's communication did, however, put them in a favorable position as a lot of the audience sided with them.

The use of humor to win over public perceptions is also a known phenomenon. The article by Chernobrov (2021, p. 3) explains how humor can be strategically used to create positive perceptions towards a message. Both cases showcase this very clearly with the audiences appreciating and enjoying the way of communicating by praising the use of humor. The Aldi case displayed this by using humor to turn the lawsuit from M&S against them, causing them to win over the public opinion, and therefore mitigating all potential harm towards their reputation. In the case of KFC, it is also clear to see that the use of humor had a very big impact on the public perceptions as a lot of reactions talked about it in a very positive way.

The last characteristic of the use of humor in communication that will be touched upon is high engagement. The study by, for example, Pozdniakova (2015, p. 16) stresses the fact that humor plays a big role in audience engagement of a brand message. In recent years brands have therefore used more and more humor in their communication strategies as it helps with engagement and is prone to go viral, especially on social media (Taecharungroj & Nueangjamnong, 2015, p. 289). When bringing this back to the two analyzed cases this is no exception. Both cases attracted a lot of attention from the media and the general audience. Aldi who conducted their communication with multiple tweets regarding the topic received hundreds of thousands of likes on their tweets about the crisis. Besides the likes thousands of people also commented under the posts and used hashtags. The KFC communication, although not initially released on social media, also quickly became viral. The #KFCCrisis was also used thousands of times and the television/radio news channels also covered the response. As humor is not a very common way to conduct crisis communication these two cases stood out to the public because of it. This caused them to gain widespread attention. The KFC case, for instance, is still talked about to this day when people mention famous crisis communication examples.

While the results predominantly consisted out of positive reactions on the use of humor in crisis communication there were also some negative reactions towards it. The previously mentioned characteristics of the use of humor in communication were positive ones, it is however crucial to also acknowledge the negative results humor can have when used in communication. The paper by Meyer (2000) manages to create a really good overview of both the positive and the negative outcomes humor can have in the field of communication. Some of the negative outcomes he mentions are misinterpretation, offending others,

undermine credibility, and lack of control (Meyer, 2000, p. 329). As said before the two cases analyzed in this study both got a lot more positive than negative feedback, therefore not a lot of the negative outcomes just discussed can be attributed to the analyzed audience reactions. The ones that did come forward were the following two, offending others and undermined credibility.

Meyer (2000, p. 329) explains that humor used in communication can backfire as it can offend the audience. More than other ways of communicating, humor can be seen as insensitive, poor taste, not funny, and inappropriate (Meyer, 2000, p. 329). If perceived as such it can have very negative consequences as it turns the audience against the organization and creates another problem to deal with. During a crisis the last thing a company wants is to create another issue that needs to be solved, therefore Meyer (2000, p. 329) calls the use of humor in these situations a double-edged sword. If it works it has great benefits, but if it backfires it amplifies the already existing problem. This can be seen as one of the major reasons why not many brands opt to use for humor during a crisis situation as it is a big risk. Regarding the KFC case the negative reactions often talked about the use of bad language and did not appreciate the fact that a company as big as KFC would not use child friendly language. Multiple reactions also stated that the way KFC communicated tarnished the legacy of the Colonel Sanders. These two types of reactions showcase that for some people the humor used was not appreciated at all and offended them in different ways. In the case of the Aldi crisis this was observed less, the negative reactions there related more to undermining the credibility of Aldi.

In the article by Meyer (2000, p. 328) the author touches on the fact that humor used in communication can also cause for the audience, to which the message is communicated, to undermine the credibility of the brand. This can be the case if humor is seen as a lack of seriousness, overused, a mismatch with the audience expectations, or inconsistent with the initial crisis (Meyer, 2000, p. 328). Most of the negative reactions regarding the Aldi case mentioned that M&S had all the right to sue them because of copyright infringement laws and that it seemed Aldi was not taking this serious by joking about it. Lack of seriousness is used by Meyer (2000, p. 328) to explain how the use of humor can undermine the credibility of the brand that uses the humor. Some reactions also mentioned that Aldi continued with similar jokes so long that it became jarring. This referred to the fact that Aldi released multiple tweets that all had the purpose of making fun of M&S, all that in just a timespan of less than a week. This is a typical example of people finding the use of humor overused, which is also a way of undermining credibility (Meyer, 2000, p. 328).

Because the negative reactions turned out to be the vast minority of the total analyzed data, they did seem to have a significant impact in undermining the success and the opinion of the overall public regarding the success stories of KFC and Aldi cases. It does, however, show that even when the use of humor in crisis communication turns out rather successful the, emerged, negative reactions can also be closely connected to it. These results are also in line with the findings by Meyer (2000, p. 329) that explain in what ways humor used in communication can be beneficial but also harmful.

4.2.2. The role of culture in how audiences perceive humor

Another interesting finding that came forward during the results, was the fact that reactions on both cases mentioned that culture played a big role in the success of the crisis communication by Aldi and KFC. Both cases used in this study took place in the United Kingdom. The Aldi communication was done on their @AldiUK X account, and the KFC communication was released on newspapers from the United Kingdom and then also continued on their @KFCUK X account. While taking into account the borderless nature of social media it is still presumable that the tweets coming from these accounts are directed to an audience predominantly from the UK. As came forward in the results the tweets mentioned the fact that the humor used was typically British and that people from other countries with different cultures (the United States were mentioned) would maybe not have appreciated this type of communication. In the theoretical framework humor was already mentioned in relation to consumer reaction in general but it was not directly connected to humor. As both cases have very similar tweets regarding the impact of culture on how humor is received by an audience it is important to compare these findings with already existing literature about the topic.

The impact culture has on how people perceive humor is a well-researched topic in the academic field. The study by Meyer (2000, p. 315) briefly mentions it and acknowledges the need to be cautious about what culture a message is addressed to when using humor as a communication tactic, the study does, however, not talk about the subject in depth. On the other hand the study by Jiang et al. (2019) gives more in-depth insights that are useful to understand the outcomes of the results. Jiang et al. (2019, p. 3) explain that while humor is a universal phenomenon it is greatly influenced by cultural backgrounds. They go on to explain major differences between how Easterners perceive humor and how Westerners perceive humor (Jiang et al., 2019, p. 3). In the western culture humor has become a desirable trait used in the daily life of people and it can help them connect or cope with certain situations

(Jiang et al., 2019, p. 2). This is drastically different in Eastern cultures, with as particular example China. While they acknowledge humor as important, they tend to not see themselves as humorous individuals and do not use it as coping mechanism or social attribute (Jiang et al., 2019, p. 2). The cultural differences between western cultures and eastern cultures are without a doubt big factor when it comes to how people from each culture perceive humor. The results of the data collection, however, also contained reactions that believed even in western countries the cultural differences play a role in how audiences react to humor.

While it is clear western cultures have more similarities in the way they perceive humor than compared to the eastern cultures, it does not mean that there are no differences at all. Studies by Schermer and Kfrerer (2020, p. 425-426), Toncar (2001, p. 525), and Chen and Dewaele (2021, p. 150) all discuss the fact that while there are a lot of similarities in how western countries/cultures use and perceive humor there are also important differences. The study by Chen and Dewaele (2021, p. 150) mentioned how Americans, for example, generally find British humor less funny and struggle more with its ironic and sarcastic elements compared to British people. While both countries are part of western culture and speak the same language Chen and Dewaele (2021, p. 149-150) identified three main dimensions of British humor Americans tend to struggle with. These dimensions include the high linguistic complexity associated with British humor, high use of irony and sarcasm, and more humor that can be seen as a violation of social and cultural norms (Chen & Dewaele, 2021, p. 149-150). These studies are in line with the data analyzed from the used cases. The main term the audience used to describe the communication was “British humor”, this makes sense as the two organizations used irony in their responses. Therefore, it is possible that if similar communication strategies were employed in other countries with different cultural contexts, the audience's reactions might vary significantly from the current outcome.

4.2.3. Role of social media on audience reactions

As already mentioned, the Aldi case took entirely place on social media and while the KFC case initially was released on traditional media in for of newspapers it went viral on social media were KFC continued the communication. The theoretical framework already went in depth and explained why social media has become a crucial component when it comes to crisis communication due to, among other things, its quick responsiveness and real time feedback. The viral nature of social media might also have played a role in the primarily positive reactions towards the crisis communication of both organizations. The paper by Moussaïd et al. (2013) may help clarify this more. Moussaïd et al. (2013, p. 1) explain that

social influence plays a crucial role in forming opinions of people, particularly through majority influence. It demonstrates that individuals often adapt their opinions to align with those of a larger group. Bringing this back to the two analyzed cases, it is possible that due to the initial positive reactions, which everyone can see on social media, it became a snowball effect of more and more people being influenced by these positive reactions. Lee et al. (2018, p. 1116) confirm in their study that social media platforms can amplify majority opinions as social media users are quickly influenced by the opinion they think is the most popular. This can be very beneficial for organizations if the opinion is in their favor, but it can also have severe negative consequences if the opinions are against them (Lee et al., 2018, p. 1117). It is also important to take this into consideration when looking for a reason for the immense success of these two cases instead of attributing it all to the humor used.

While most of the reactions consisted out of positive and negative tweets, these two categories are arguably the most important ones in order to draw conclusions, it is however important to also mention the third main category that emerged during the data analysis. That category consists out of the neutral reactions, most of these reactions did not really mention the use of humor in the communication. In the theoretical framework crisis communication and crisis management were thoroughly addressed using, especially, the scope and research created by Timothy Coombs. When touching upon the outcomes of crisis communication Coombs merely spoke about positive or negative outcomes. While the majority of the reactions fall under these two it does not take away from the fact that a considerable amount was classified as neutral. The study by Chia (2019, p. 7) explains that people that do not have a strong opinion or are neutral often refrain to react or speak up about a certain discussion or message. The question, therefore, arises about what motivation these people have to comment on the situation if they do not directly give an opinion about that relates to the message. An answer to that question could be the fact that social media platforms such as X are made to encourage engagement and incite individuals to partake in discussions (Mangold & Faulds, 2009, p. 361; Zhang et al., 2011, p. 161). As explained in the results section a lot of the neutral reactions tried to use the high engagement that the crisis generated to promote their own products, or they wrote a funny tweet on their own try and gain as much engagement as possible. By reacting to the popular topic and getting involved into the discussions users might hope to gain something out of it such as new followers or even new customers in the case of restaurants promoting themselves. This was also the case with all the reactions mentioning that the real issue was not the chicken shortage, but the way chickens are treated to support the mass production of food. The research by Vasterman (2005, p. 511) discusses

how a sudden event that creates media attention can be used by other brands and organizations to promote or raise awareness for something else. The vegan activists that want to raise awareness on the well-being of chickens did exactly that, they used the hype the KFC communication created to put forward their own agenda.

5. Conclusion

In this study two cases of crisis communication were analyzed, the KFC chicken shortage crisis in 2018 that took place in the UK and the Aldi caterpillar cake crisis that was caused due to legal actions being taken against them by M&S in 2021 also in the UK. These crises were selected because both of them completely or predominantly took place on social media and most importantly they both make use of humor as a main component in their crisis communication strategy. By using qualitative textual analysis that revolved around the analysis of consumer reaction tweets regarding both cases, the aim of the study was to answer the following research question: *“How do consumers perceive humor as a form of social media crisis communication in the UK?”* A total of 607 tweets (307 KFC crisis, 300 Aldi crisis) were manually collected using purposive sampling. The process of data analysis and coding followed the steps outlined by (Schreier et al., 2019, p. 7).

In the results section where the data analysis was being discussed three main categories came forward. The categories consisted out of positive, negative and neutral reactions. With a combined total of 466 (249 KFC+217 Aldi) combined reactions the positive category was by far the largest. With such a large part of the overall reactions in both cases being positive it is easy to conclude the crisis communication strategies of both the organizations turned out to be successful. A closer look, however, was needed to determine what the impact of the use of humor had on this outcome. When further analyzing the positive responses, it became clear that the audience appreciated the boldness and creativity of employing humor, seeing it as a refreshing compared to the typical crisis responses. For instance, tweets praising the social media teams for their way of communicating were numerous. Many even suggesting to the organizations that these teams deserved pay raises. These tweets, combined with the many reactions that explicitly forgave the brands, acknowledged the human element behind the brands that created a sense of relatability and approachability, aligning with Meyer's (2000, p. 317) findings that humor can make a brand more relatable and trusted. Additionally, it seemed that the ability of humor to diffuse tension was effective in the KFC case, where the audience's attention tended to shift more towards the crisis communication rather than the crisis itself. Similarly, Aldi's humorous approach managed to turn the lawsuit against M&S into a public relations victory as many reactions expressed their support towards Aldi and criticized/disapproved of M&S.

Besides the overall positive reaction, a total of 55 (26 KFC+29 Aldi) tweets turned out to be negative. While this is a relatively small amount and does not significantly impact the positive outcomes of both cases, it does however show that humor also has the potential to

have a negative impact on the consumer perceptions on crisis communication. The negative reactions that addressed the humor especially mentioned that it made the response inappropriate or that the humor undermined the seriousness of the situation. This aligns with the study by Meyer (2000, p. 329) that describes the use of humor in communication as a double-edged sword, meaning that it can be very beneficial, but it can also backfire. It is, therefore, important to note that while the use of humor was successful in the two analyzed cases, it is not a guarantee that it will have positive results in different situations. With these findings, however, it is clear that humor played a big role in impacting the consumer reactions in a positive way regarding the KFC and Aldi crisis.

The third main category that emerged out of the data analysis consisted out of 86 (32 KFC+54 Aldi) neutral reactions. These reactions consisted out of tweets that did not have a direct opinion (neither positive nor negative) on the crisis communication. These neutral comments often tried to gain engagement themselves by promoting something or making a joke about the situation. As explained in the discussion the engaging nature of social media could have played a significant role in forming these reactions. This idea was based on the studies by Mangold and Faulds (2009, p. 361) and Zhang et al. (2011, p. 161) that explain how social media platforms are created to foster engagement even for people that do not have a particular opinion, and how a topic with high media attention can be used by individuals or organizations to promote their own agenda.

Lastly, a closer look was taken at how culture and social media might influence how consumers perceive humor in crisis communication. It became clear that cultural factors significantly impact how humor is interpreted by people from different cultures. In these two cases for instance, British humor, which is characterized by its irony and sarcasm, was often used by respondents to describe the humor used in both of the analyzed crisis communication. This type of humor might resonate well in the UK but could be less appreciated in other cultures like the US, as noted by Chen and Dewaele (2021, p. 150). These cultural nuances mean that humor that works in one context might not be perceived well in another, highlighting the importance of adjusting crisis communication strategies to cultural expectations. Additionally, the engaging nature of social media can amplify majority opinions, as suggested by Lee et al. (2018, p. 1116). Initial positive reactions can create a snowball effect, with more users aligning with the already posted opinions. In that case the visible majority dictates the opinions of the audience. While in these cases the initial reaction was positive and could have influenced majority opinion, it could also have been the opposite,

leading to a cascade of negative perceptions. The dynamic nature of social media encourages widespread engagement, which can significantly shape public perception during a crisis.

In conclusion, the analysis showed that consumers largely perceived humor positively when used in social media crisis management for the two examined cases in this study. However, it became evident that this favorable perception is not universal for all crisis communications. Cultural context and the use of social media platforms, for example, significantly influence how humor is received by the audience. The theoretical framework also underscored that the type and scope of a crisis plays a crucial role in determining the effectiveness of humor as a strategy. While humor can humanize a brand and alleviate tension, it can also go wrong, leading to negative reactions and damaging the overall brand image. Consequently, using humor in crisis communication is seen as a bold and risky practice. Organizations should, therefore, carefully deliberate and conduct thorough research to determine whether it is the most appropriate approach for their specific crisis.

5.1. Theoretical and societal implications

This study aimed to contribute to the already existing literature about the use of humor in crisis communication. While the use of humor in brand communication and advertising is widely researched, limited research has been conducted specifically about the use of humor in crisis communication. The findings of this study can, therefore, be used to enhance the corpus of academic literature about the topic.

The findings can also be used in a more practical way by companies or organizations. The study showcases this by talking about the potential benefits of humor, such as increased engagement and positive public perception, but also lays a big emphasis on the risks and potential pitfalls of the usage of humor in crisis communication. The considerations made in the research can help organizations make informed decisions about whether humor is the right approach for their specific crisis situation, ultimately enhancing their crisis communication effectiveness and the overall brand wellbeing.

5.2. Limitations and Future Research

This study provides valuable insights into how consumers perceive humor as a form of social media crisis communication, but it also has several limitations. The case study analyzed two cases, KFC and Aldi, both of the crises took place in the UK and were related to food. Because of this the collected reactions were mostly from people that live or are culturally associated with the UK, therefore the results of this study only apply to this specific demographic. Especially the cultural aspect makes it difficult to predict how the general

public would react in other countries with different cultures than the UK. Additionally, the study collected all the data from the social media platform X, which may not fully capture consumer sentiment across other social media platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, or TikTok. The total number of collected tweets (608) also formed a relatively small sample size, more data could have given a more complete overview of the consumer sentiment relating to these two cases. That being said the data did not have a lot of singular outliers which indicates an acceptable level of saturation was met.

Another limitation is that the study does not provide insights into how beneficial the use of humor was for the brands in the long term. While immediate consumer reactions were largely positive, it remains unclear how these reactions impacted the overall brand perception over an extended period of time.

For future research, it would be good to examine a broader range of brands and crises to determine if the positive reception of humor in crisis communication holds across different contexts. Expanding the cultural scope to include reactions from various countries could also provide a more comprehensive understanding of how cultural differences impact the perception of humor. Additionally, incorporating multiple social media platforms and focusing more on the emotional tone of the collected data could give a more nuanced picture of consumer reactions. Finally, future research could aim to evaluate the long-term effects of humor in crisis communication on brand image and reputation.

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Appendix A: Coding Tree

This coding tree portrays the three main categories with the sub-categories including descriptions and examples.

Main Category	Subcategory	Description	Examples
Positive Reactions	- Praise for PR/Social Media Team	Recognition for the PR/social media team's effort and success. (Suggesting pay raise)	"Your PR team need a pay rise, never laughed so much #marks&snitches 🤪🤪."
	- High praise for crisis handling (general positive feedback)	General appreciation of the handling of the crisis.	"An example of how to handle a business disaster in the best way! Well done @KFC_UKI."
	- Acknowledgment of Humor	Appreciation of the humor used in crisis communication.	"Top class marketing 😊! Never seen a company be so playful about something and get so much fab publicity!"
	- Appreciation of risk in using humor	Recognition of the risk involved in using humor.	"You took a brand risk with this apology and it absolutely paid off."
	- Culture/Region specific humor recognition	Comments on how the humor aligns with cultural norms.	"Love it. Although this apology would not fly in the US. Americans have lost their sense of humour."
	- Increased interest in product (craving)	Tweets indicating a heightened interest in purchasing products.	"Literally never wanted KFC more in my life this

			week! #KFCCrisis."
	- Engagement with Humor (own jokes)	Consumers engaging with the humor used in crisis communication.	"The chicken crossed the road, just not to the restaurants 🍗."
	- Defense Against Competitors	Tweets defending Aldi by criticizing M&S.	"Just shows how pathetic M&S are really."
	- Accepting apology	Tweets forgiving and accepting the apology	Apology totally accepted @KFCUKI - Saying sorry means a lot in life. #KFCCrisis #KFC
Negative Reactions	- Critique of Humor Use	Criticism of the use of humor in crisis communication.	"#KFC Fire your entire marketing dept! Colonel Harlan Sanders would be turning in his grave at the gimmicky crap ur cranking out."
	- Inappropriate language concerns	Criticism of language used in crisis communication.	"As a woman who cares about children & teaching them appropriate language, I don't like this at all Tham! They needed creative input from nice moms. 📌🌸 #KFCCrisis"
	- Unprofessionalism	Criticisms focusing on the perceived unprofessional why	"This is completely immature - no respectable

		of responding to the issue.	business would be taking the piss out of being slapped with copyright infringement."
	- Pro-vegan reactions (KFC)	Tweets from pro-vegan individuals critiquing the crisis.	"The real chicken crisis is the thousands upon thousands of chickens killed every single week."
	- Frustration over store closures (KFC)	Complaints about the inconvenience caused by store closures.	"Not happy about the KFC stores being shut through lack of chicken products."
	Perception of Bullying	Comments accusing Aldi of inciting negative behavior towards M&S.	"Aldi is inciting their followers to attack and bully M&S."
Neutral Reactions	Suspicion of Marketing Stunt and sincerity of the crisis	Tweets questioning the authenticity of the crises.	"I'm wondering if this is a coordinated PR stunt by M&S and Aldi."
	- Promotions of own brand/products (using the hype)	Tweets promoting other restaurants or food options.	"Who needs #KFCCrisis when you can do @philvickerytv fried chicken !!"
	General Comments and Observations	Neutral comments about the crisis communication without strong opinions.	"Only the UK can go bonkers about a bloody caterpillar."
	- Comments on the drama over a cake (Aldi)	Observations on the significant attention given to the crisis.	"What's the fuss about? Caterpillar

			cakes are a thing everywhere!"
	- Serious suggestions for legal strategies (Aldi)	Practical advice offered to Aldi regarding the lawsuit.	"Offering Aldi tips to use in order to win the lawsuit."
	- Adjectives describing the crisis response (nor positive, nor negative)	Descriptive comments about the nature of the crisis response.	"Daring", "Bold"